

# Union Pacific Railroad Dining Lodges and Cafeterias for the National Parks

**B**eginning with McCartney's Hotel, the first in Yellowstone National Park, providing visitor services has been an integral function of any national park's infrastructure. As more and more visitors began coming to parks, more and more services were required. From the grand lodges to the simple comfort station, thousands of buildings have been erected in the parks in a variety of architectural styles. Early styles were rustic and matched the parks' surroundings, and most of the smaller structures were meant not to distract from the parks themselves. Later styles are more utilitarian in design, much like today's post offices.

Railroads played a defining role in the early history of national park architecture; the Northern Pacific Railroad came to Yellowstone and Glacier National Parks, and the Union Pacific Railroad came to Zion and Bryce Canyon National Parks and the North Rim of Grand Canyon National Park, as well as to the West Entrance to Yellowstone National Park. These are but two of the railroads historically associated with national parks, and their legacy of early national park building development has left the nation and the world a truly outstanding collection of architectural works.

The Union Pacific Railroad began its relationship with the western national parks on a large scale with the construction of a branch line of the Oregon Short Line Railroad. This line extended from Ashton, Idaho to the west boundary of Yellowstone

Park Service, formed the Utah Parks Company to provide transportation and related visitor services to the new southern Utah parks—Bryce Canyon, Zion, and Cedar Breaks National Monument—as well as to the North Rim of the Grand Canyon. With a line to Cedar City, Utah, the company then planned to use buses to conduct park tours. Expanding upon experience gained at West Yellowstone (as the town at the West Entrance of Yellowstone had come to be called), the Union Pacific began offering a variety of tours to the new parks, with some packages including Yellowstone. The company would also finance the construction of new buildings within the parks.

Gilbert Stanley Underwood, an emerging architect who had already designed buildings for concessionaires, was recommended to Union Pacific to design the new facilities needed in Utah. This recommendation came from Daniel Hull, a principle planner and designer with the National Park Service's landscape division who had met Underwood when both attended the University of Illinois. Hull's recommendation led to a relationship between the Union Pacific and Underwood that lasted throughout the 1920s and early 1930s. This association would lead to the design and construction of buildings in Bryce Canyon and Zion National Parks, on the North Rim of the Grand Canyon, and in Cedar Breaks National Monument. Underwood also designed the cafeterias at Kanab, Utah (a hub town for Bryce, Zion and the North Rim), and West

*Union Pacific Dining Lodge in West Yellowstone, Montana, built in 1925.*

National Park in Montana. Begun in 1905 and completed in November of 1907, the line saw its first visitors arrive at Yellowstone National Park on June 11, 1908. In 1923, Union Pacific, at the request of the National





*Zion cafeteria, built in 1934, now serving as the Zion Nature Center.*

Yellowstone, Montana. One of his most outstanding works, constructed in 1926 (although not for the Union Pacific), was the Ahwahnee Hotel in Yosemite National Park.

It is easy to overlook Underwood's smaller buildings—dorms, comfort stations, garages, powerhouses, and such—but one type of building that has been most neglected is the cafeteria. Underwood designed six cafeterias for Union Pacific between 1925 and 1934. These buildings were constructed to handle the need for meals when no overnight lodging was necessary.

Cafeterias constructed for the Utah Parks Company were small in scale, due to the lower numbers of visitors to the Utah parks. The architecture was nonetheless fitting for each site.

At Zion, Underwood designed a small, pleasing, rustic structure with rock corners and large windows. The exposed rafters are of a squared scissor-truss design, and complementary to the main lodge at Zion. The meals provided were in the cafeteria style, without waitresses or waiters. Today, the building houses the Zion Nature Center and provides some quarters for park employees. The main kitchen area has been closed off and remodeled, and the fireplace is enclosed by a wall.

At Bryce Canyon and on the North Rim of the Grand Canyon, cafeterias similar in design were located at the campgrounds and included camper services such as grocery stores, showers, laundry and the ever-present curio shop. The cafeteria at Bryce is no longer used for its original purpose, and the building has been modified to a great extent: both fireplaces are enclosed behind walls. It has the same exposed square scissor-truss system seen in the Zion cafeteria. The exterior mimics the lodge at Bryce Canyon and only the large fireplace at the back shows the rock structure common to Underwood's rustic designs. The

cafeteria on the North Rim, like that at Bryce Canyon, is still in use as a store with camper services but not as a cafeteria.

The Kanab dining facility is perhaps the most unusual of the six cafeterias designed by Underwood. The outside is not of rustic design, and the only resemblance to the other cafeterias is the rockwork on the exterior of the fireplace. Overall, the building looks like a giant railroad barn, and is tied into an existing house that was built in 1904.

From the start in West Yellowstone, the need to provide meal services to tourists was apparent. Arriving in the early morning, rail passengers required breakfast before proceeding into Yellowstone for their tours. In the late afternoon, outbound passengers would require dinner before boarding the southbound train. In 1908, before there was a town, the Union Pacific built the first of three restaurant facilities. As traffic increased on the line due to an aggressive promotional campaign, the first facility, a tar paper shack, was replaced in 1913 by a larger and more elegant structure. This facility would also prove too small to handle all the traffic and, by 1922, an accompanying Rest Pavilion was built to provide a place for passengers to wait for a table. At that time, it was decided to build a large enough structure to handle the volume of passengers and also, probably, to make a statement about the Union Pacific Railroad's standards of first-class travel.

Gilbert Stanley Underwood's design for the new Union Pacific Dining Lodge in West Yellowstone was monumental in size—some 17,000 square feet, with about 6,400 square feet in the dining area alone. The main dining area could seat up to 350 people at a time, although usually it sat between 250 and 300. Included in the dining area is an arrowhead-shaped fireplace large enough to accommodate built-in seats for those wanting to get closer to the fire. Additional facilities included a kitchen large enough to prepare some 1,000 meals per day, a separate bakery, a butcher shop, an employee dining area, a scullery, a linen room, a coal room, the manager's office, and several large walk-in refrigerators and freezers.

Recent research has led to the discovery that the 1922 Rest Pavilion was incorporated into the

*Kanab, Utah, cafeteria, built in 1928 and tied into 1904 house on right.*



design by Underwood. The pavilion, which sat on the site chosen for the dining lodge, was rotated 90 degrees and incorporated into the new building. The side entrance doors of the pavilion were taken out and a fireplace installed in their place. New doors were added at the ends, a rock facade was placed around the existing columns, and restrooms were added. The old Rest Pavilion, now called the Firehole Room, is located on the east end of the dining lodge.

Operated from mid-June through the first week of September by the Union Pacific Dining Car Division, the Union Pacific Dining Lodge could not have made money. Surely, its intent was to make a statement of pride for the Union Pacific Railroad.

Over the years, all these cafeterias provided a needed service and contributed to the overall impression that visitors received of the national parks. As railroad travel declined in the late 1950s, the Union Pacific started to scale back its services in national park areas. As tours were discontinued, cafeterias were no longer needed and were slowly closed down. The cafeteria buildings in Bryce Canyon and Zion National Parks have been transferred to National Park Service ownership, but the facility on the North Rim of the Grand Canyon is still owned by the concessionaire. The cafeteria at Cedar Breaks was taken down, the facility in Kanab is privately owned, and the Union Pacific Dining Lodge is now owned by the town of West Yellowstone. With the exception of interior changes, the remaining cafeterias designed by Underwood for the Union Pacific Railroad are still in good shape. They are available for viewing and open to the public (and you can get a good Chinese dinner at the one in Kanab). In West Yellowstone, the Union Pacific Dining Lodge is available for conventions. Recently, the Yellowstone Historic Center in

West Yellowstone was formed to oversee rehabilitation of the Dining Lodge and other railroad buildings located in the Oregon Short Line Terminus Historic District. Engineering and needs assessment studies are currently being done on the Dining Lodge and other structures in cooperation with the National Park Service's Cooperative Program For Architectural Conservation (Barry Sulam, Program Manager at Montana State University), and the National Trust for Historic Preservation (Barbara Pahl, Director of Mountains and Plains Region).

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*Photos by the author, courtesy West Yellowstone Historical Society Archives.*